TAYLOR LORENZ BUSINESS MAY 1, 2026 4:25 PM

# A Dark-Money Campaign Is Paying Influencers to Frame Chinese AI as a Threat

**Build American AI, a nonprofit linked to a super PAC bankrolled by executives at OpenAI and Andreessen Horowitz, is funding a campaign to spread pro-AI messaging and stoke fears about China.**

PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION: WIRED STAFF; GETTY IMAGES

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IN AN INSTAGRAM video posted on April 1, lifestyle influencer Melissa Strahle poses outdoors before an American flag as soft instrumental music plays. "AI lets me focus on what matters most," she tells her 1.4 million followers. "We need to invest in American-made AI to ensure America leads the way in innovation and job creation."

Strahle labeled the post an advertisement, but she didn't disclose what organization had paid for it. It turns out the funding came from Build American AI, a dark-money group tied to Leading the Future, a $100 million super PAC supported by, and in some cases directly funded by, tech figures affiliated with companies like OpenAI and Palantir.

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The video is part of a coordinated influence campaign that Build American AI is funding, which is being rolled out on social media in two phases. The first focused on working with lifestyle influencers like Strahle, who did not respond to a request for comment, to promote the US artificial intelligence industry and American innovation. But the second and current phase of the campaign is all about China.

Marketing agencies are pitching influencers deals such as $5,000 per TikTok video to amplify Build American AI's messaging about how China's technological rise should be seen as a threat. The goal, according to a staffer from SM4, the influencer marketing agency running the campaign on behalf of Build American AI, is to subtly shift public debate by framing China's AI advancement as a serious risk to the safety and well-being of Americans.

"They want a push to mention China and America and why beating China is so important," says the staffer.

Sample messaging provided by Build American AI to content creators includes lines like "I just learned that China is trying really hard to beat the US in AI. If they do, it could mean that China gets personal data from me and my kids, and take jobs that should be here in the US. In the AI innovation race, I'm Team USA!!!"

WIRED first learned about the campaign after this article's author was invited by SM4 to participate. The details were later confirmed by several other content creators who received similar outreach.

Josh Murphy, an ecologist with over 130,000 followers on Instagram who says he did not respond to SM4's offer, explains that while he's "not necessarily against AI," combining generic praise for the technology with aggressive anti-China messaging felt off to him. "AI can absolutely be utilized for the betterment of humanity," Murphy says, "but this unregulated industry that we have right now, where it's just wacky tech bros that are pursuing greed at the expense of everything else, is just not what it's supposed to be."

"The United States has an opportunity to remain the global leader in AI innovation, and we're taking that message to the broadest possible audience through an all-of-the-above communications strategy," Jesse Hunt, a spokesperson representing Leading the Future, said of the campaign. "Dark money doomer groups have spent millions spreading misinformation to the American public, and we won't let it go unchallenged. We'll continue to highlight AI's economic benefits, counter false narratives, and build the coalition needed to advance a national regulatory framework using every tool at our disposal."

Supporters of Leading the Future include OpenAI president and cofounder Greg Brockman, venture capitalist and Palantir cofounder Joe Lonsdale, venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, and AI company Perplexity, according to the PAC. Leading the Future says it has received $140 million in total contributions and commitments, with $51 million available to spend to push its pro-AI agenda as of April. The news site NOTUS called the group a "massive political war chest for the AI industry."

An OpenAI spokesperson says that OpenAI has no corporate affiliation with Leading the Future or Build American AI and has "not provided funding or any other support to either group." A spokesperson for Palantir says the company has also not contributed to either group. Perplexity declined to comment. Andreessen Horowitz did not respond to a request for comment.

## Information Wars

Leading the Future is trying to steer AI policy in the industry's favor at a potentially pivotal moment. AI is shaping up to be a key issue in the 2026 midterms, and groups advocating for the industry are spending heavily to push back on growing public concerns about issues like data centers, energy use, and potential job displacement. Just this week, US senator Bernie Sanders promoted the claim that "AI could pose an existential threat to humanity."

Build American AI is trying to combat negative narratives about the technology by working with influencers on the platforms where Americans increasingly learn about current events. Fifty-three percent of US adults say they get at least some of their news from social media, and 38 percent of people aged 18 to 29 report regularly consuming news from influencers, according to recent polling by Pew Research Center.

But influencers are not bound by journalistic ethical standards, and many do not always disclose who is funding their work. Well-funded super PACs and dark-money groups have capitalized on that reality by funneling cash into influencer marketing agencies that pay content creators to promote specific narratives. As a result, many people scrolling their social feeds are likely unaware that they're absorbing political messaging from corporate interests.

"Consumers don't know when the information they're receiving is paid for," says Jamie Cohen, associate professor of media studies at Queens College, CUNY. "These influencers are accepting undisclosed money from the [AI] industry, they're promoting the messaging of specific companies, and the public has no idea. It is extremely corrosive to democracy."

A slew of high-profile lifestyle influencers across TikTok and Instagram have taken part in phase one of Build American AI's influence campaign, according to a list of example posts shared by the staffer from SM4.

In early April, for example, Megan Linke, a family and kids sports influencer, posted an Instagram video explaining how AI helps her stay organized. "AI is changing everything, and it's important we keep building it here in the US," she says in the voice-over. Around the same time, Uche Madson, another motherhood influencer based in Virginia, posted a video telling her 412,000 Instagram followers that she thinks "it's important we invest in American AI so America leads the way in AI innovation and job creation."

Both influencers labeled the posts as advertisements but did not disclose who the advertisements were for or that they had been paid for as part of a campaign for Build American AI. Linke and Madson did not respond to requests for comment from WIRED.

According to a briefing document that Build American AI provided to influencers, the organization is now seeking to "extend beyond left-leaning female lifestyle and family [content creators] to focus on left-leaning influencers who are political commentators, business/tech leaders, and male lifestyle influencers."

The SM4 staffer claims their agency is tasked with recruiting left-wing content creators, while a partner agency is focused on recruiting right-wing talent.On a call, the staffer said they were seeking influencers who could speak explicitly about China and the need to "protect Americans in the AI race." The briefing document instructs prospective content creators to discuss the importance of American AI while doing other activities such as "making breakfast for the kids."

The rhetoric provided to influencers echoes long-standing talking points from companies like OpenAI and Palantir, which have pointed to China's AI advances as a reason to boost US AI investment and resist tighter domestic regulations on the technology. "We are going to be the dominant player, and China is going to be the dominant player, and there will just be very different rules depending on who wins," Palantir CEO Alex Karp said on *The Axios Show* in November. "I'm worried about China," Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI, told a group of reporters last year.

Tech companies and their executives have also repeatedly argued that advancing American AI is essential to safeguarding democracy. "When people are worried about surveillance, of course, there are huge dangers there," Karp said last year on *The Axios Show*. "but you know, you will have far fewer rights if America's not in the lead." In a blog post outlining the company's views on national security, OpenAI said it believes "democracies should continue to take the lead in AI development, guided by values like freedom, fairness, and respect for human rights."

But Cohen points out that attempting to warp the information ecosystem by spreading undisclosed political messaging is not exactly in line with upholding democratic ideals. "A partnership label or 'hashtag ad' is not enough to explain what the agenda is behind the information these influencers are presenting," he says. "They're not disclosing the agenda underneath it. This is literally propaganda."

The influencer campaign is one of a number of efforts funded by Build American AI designed to shape public discourse about the technology. The organization has also been running advertisements on X with messaging such as "AI leadership is national security" overlaid atop an American flag. "The US must lead or our adversaries will."

*This is an edition of **Zeyi Yang** and **Louise Matsakis**' **Made in China newsletter**. Read previous newsletters **here**.*

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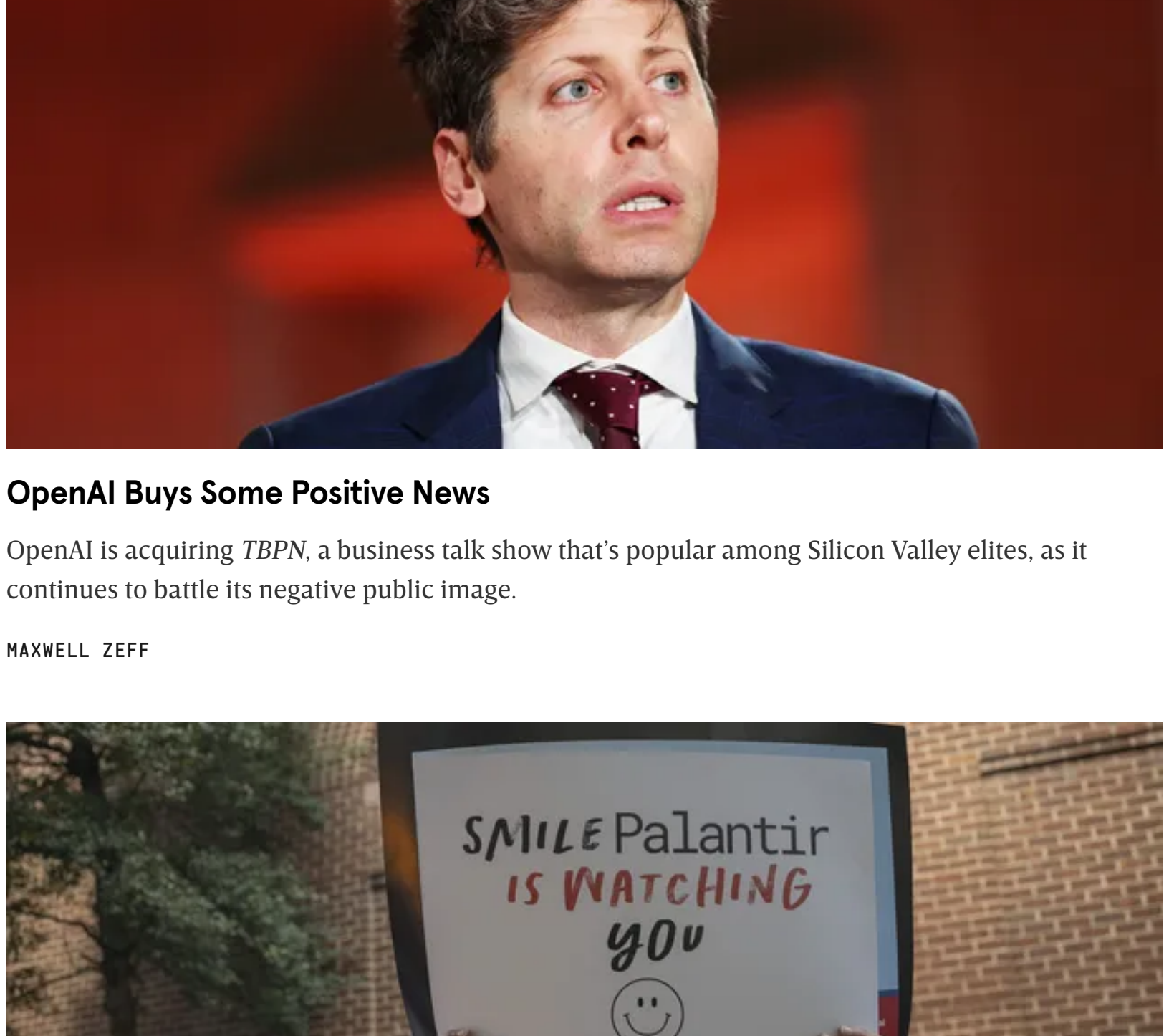

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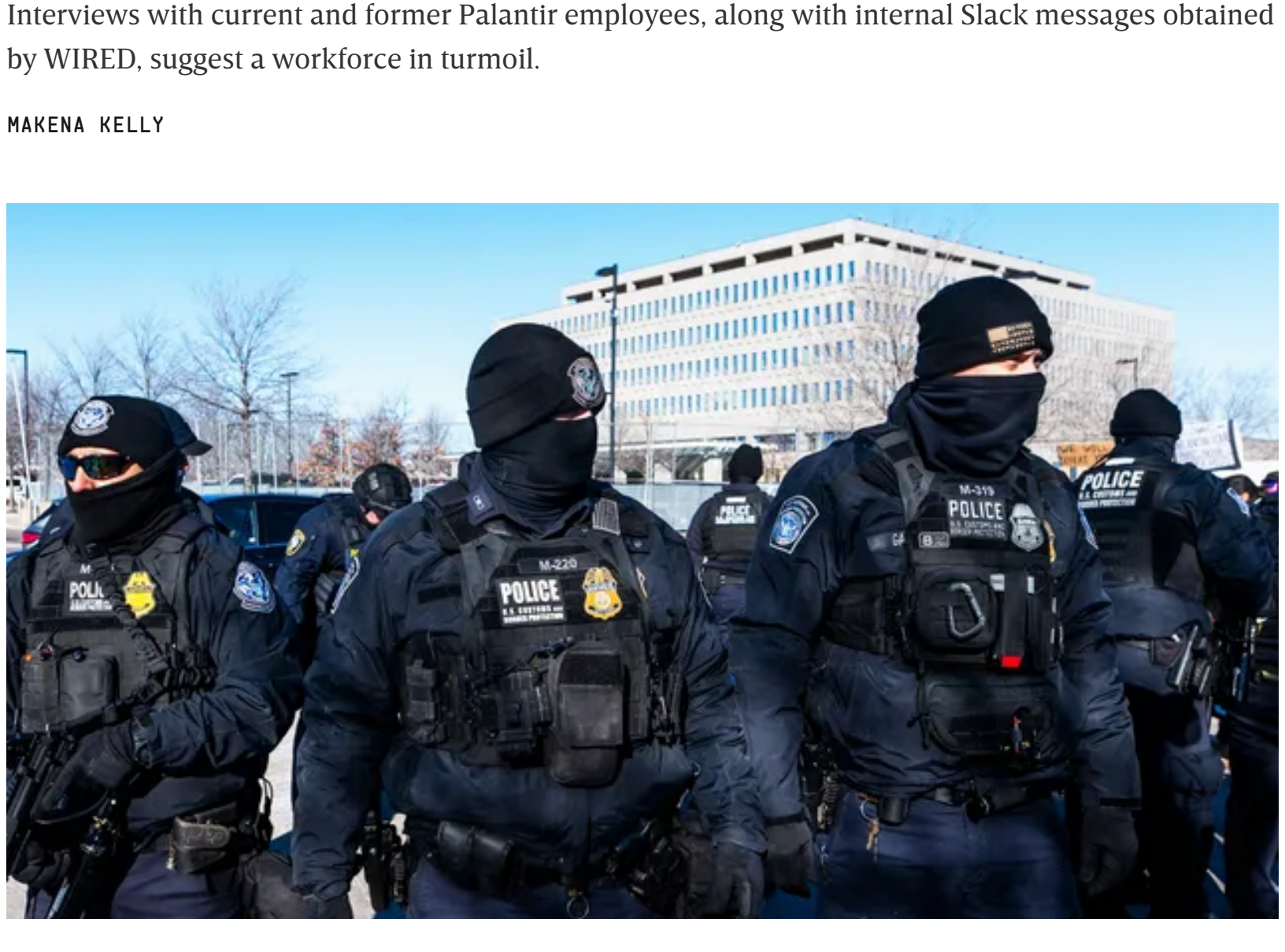

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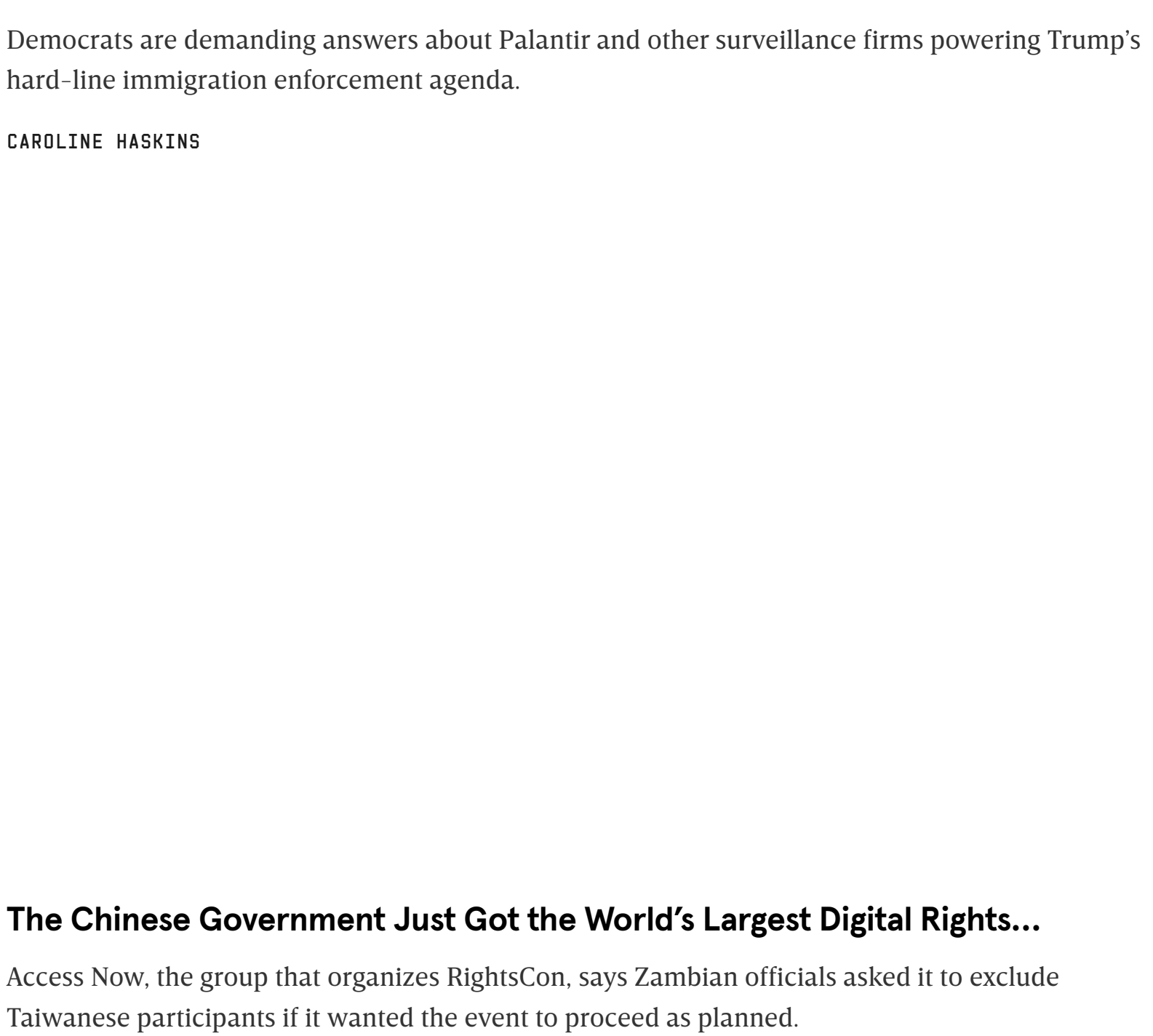

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